

American Neoclassical
SCULPTURE



at The Corcoran Gallery of Art



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Washington, D.C.
1988

The installation of the Corcoran's atrium with American neoclassical sculpture from the permanent collection has been a museum-wide project, the rewards of such a collaboration, enormous. Sincere appreciation for their contributions is extended to the entire Corcoran staff, with particular thanks to Christina Orr-Cahall, Jane Livingston, William Bodine, Dare Hartwell, Dave Holland, Steve Brown, and Clyde Paton for their unwavering commitment; to project researcher Kathleen Miller, sculpture conservator Meg Craft, and archivist Kathleen Kovacs; and to museum colleagues Mark Leithauser, Gaillard Ravenel, and George Gurney who generously lent their advice and expertise.

Financial support from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Richard King Mellon Foundation have made possible the first steps in restoration of the atrium space as well as conservation work and research on the Corcoran's collection. Finally, very special thanks go to Edward Nygren, co-director of the project and now director of the Smith College Museum of Art, whose sensitive eye has helped shape this installation.

Barbara Moore
Curator of Education

Cover: Hiram Powers, *A Country Woman*, marble, 1838.

Title page: William Rinehart
Roma Lyman, marble, 1873.

The atrium installation has been supported by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Richard King Mellon Foundation. Conservation of the Gallery's American neoclassical sculpture was made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. © 1988 The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. All rights reserved.

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Introduction

When this building opened in 1897, the atrium was filled with plaster casts of famous statues from the Renaissance, Middle Ages, and Greco-Roman antiquity. Such an installation, common in nineteenth-century art museums, was intended to familiarize the viewer with great masterpieces of western art and to provide students with models for study. For many years, the Corcoran School of Art held drawing classes here. Today, all that remains of the initial installation is a cast of part of the Parthenon frieze, at the south end of the atrium.

It is partly out of respect and affection for the history of this building that the atrium has been returned to its original function as a statuary hall. The present display of nineteenth-century neoclassical marbles is evocative of that first installation.

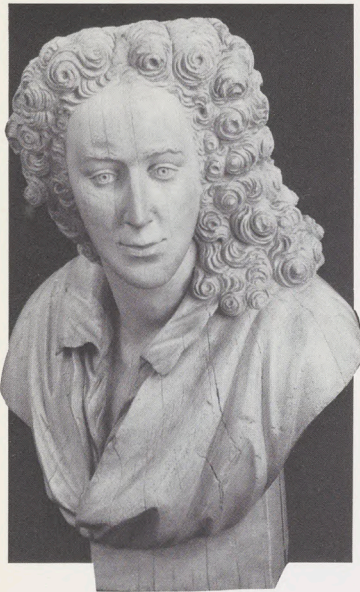
The atrium of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, c.1910.



American Neoclassical Sculpture at the Corcoran

Portrait Busts

America's interest in neoclassicism emerged in the late eighteenth century as this young country identified its democracy with those of antiquity—fifth-century Athens and republican Rome. Along with this association came a growing interest in portrait statuary. What better way to denote patriotism than to portray Americans as the Romans had portrayed their citizens!



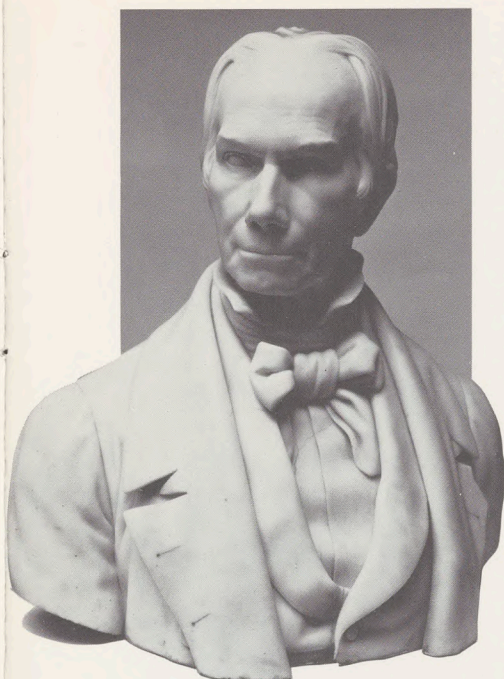
William Rush, *Linnaeus*,
wood, 1812.

One European sculptor whose portrait busts were familiar to many Americans was the Frenchman Jean-Antoine Houdon (1741–1828). Typically, Houdon emphasized the human qualities of his sitters, conveying a strong sense of their personality. While he usually depicted his subjects in contemporary dress, occasionally he employed a neoclassical mode, draping figures in antique costume or leaving the shoulders bare. Still, Houdon managed to avoid any suggestion of pretense or falsehood on the part of his sitters. Houdon's portraits echo the philosophy and spirit of the Enlightenment, which placed natural man, free of artifice, at the center of the universe.

Many renowned Americans posed for Houdon when they visited Paris. Often they ordered replicas of the original marble portrait, usually in plaster but sometimes in terracotta, marble, or bronze, to be given to friends and institutions back home. These works spread Houdon's fame to the young republic. It is impossible to determine how much Houdon's art actually influenced American sculptors, but clearly many responded to the warmth of portraits such as *John Paul Jones* (1780s), which expresses the vulnerability of America's naval hero.

Houdon's influence on American sculpture is seen in the portrait busts of William Rush (1756–1833), the most talented and ambitious of America's early sculptors. Trained by his father, a ship's carpenter, Rush painted his wooden statues white to look like antique marbles. Like Houdon, however, Rush was not a strict neoclassicist. His portraits—like that of *Carl Linnaeus* (1812)—are lively and intimate, projecting a sense of the sitter's humanity rather than an austere and impersonal classical ideal.

Neoclassical by virtue of its austere marble whiteness, the Corcoran bust of *Henry Clay* (1830s) by Joel Hart of Kentucky (1810–1877) is nevertheless intensely realistic. Trained as a stone mason, Hart was a self-taught artist who strove for a high degree of realism in his portraits. For his likeness of Clay, Hart relied on early photographs

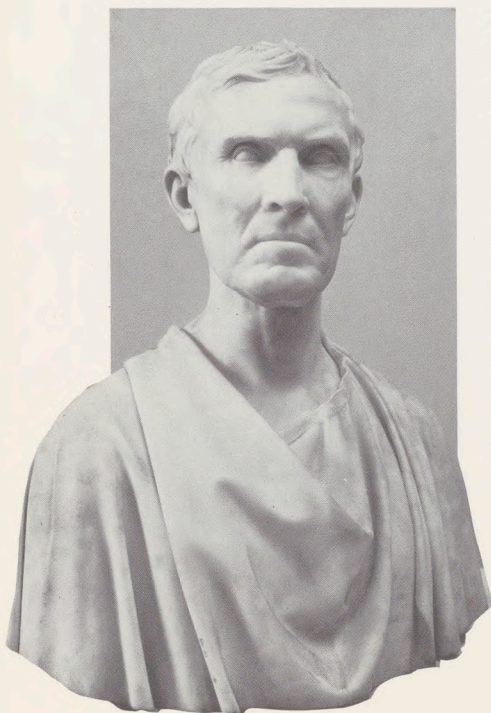


Joel Hart, *Henry Clay*,
marble 1830s.

and took plaster casts of the sitter's features. Hart's method of working may explain the naturalistic quality of Clay's portrait, which provides an accurate description of the subject's face as well as a hint of his high-spirited personality.

Hart left his native Kentucky in 1845. He went east in hopes of exhibiting his portrait busts and obtaining commissions. This trip had a profound effect on his subsequent art. In Philadelphia Hart saw works by Rush, Houdon, and other neoclassical sculptors, foreign and native-born. He probably visited the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, which had housed a collection of plaster casts of antique statues and portrait busts ever since it opened in 1806. Upon Hart's return to Lexington, he made a portrait of U.S. Senator *John Crittenden* (1849), which shows the impact of this journey.

In its pronounced classicism, Hart's bust of *Crittenden* differs dramatically from the more mundane likeness of Clay. Indeed no portrait in the Corcoran illustrates better how neoclassical sculpture pressed the connection between nineteenth-century America and ancient democracies. *Crittenden* is depicted in an antique costume that ennobles the sitter by its association with ancient Romans. The smooth, regular folds of his drapery also provide a visually satisfying alternative to the contemporary dress in the *Clay* portrait, further dignifying *Crittenden's* image.



Joel Hart, *John T. Crittenden*,
marble 1849.

Hart remained committed to realism: photographs of Crittenden reveal exactly the same prominent wrinkles and bumps Hart recorded. But the informality of the *Clay* portrait has been replaced by a sober mood. In fact *Crittenden's* direct and static pose, emphasizing his grim countenance, recalls ancient Roman portraits in the so-called "veristic" style.¹ Characterized by stark realism, with exaggerated emphasis on the sitter's facial imperfections and signs of age, veristic portraiture illustrates the ancient Roman principle of "gravitas" over "vanitas." Verism has been seen as a reflection of the internal conflict which beset Rome during the late republic. Perhaps it is no coincidence that when Hart recalled this ancient portrait style, pre-Civil War America faced similar dissension from within. Indeed, John Crittenden was deeply involved in this nation's domestic crisis over slavery. He is remembered today, like Henry Clay, for trying to resolve the differences between North and South through compromise.

1. The Roman "veristic" portrait style flourished in the last years of the republic (late first century B.C.) and periodically resurfaced during the Imperial Age (27 B.C.—330 A.D.).

American Sculptors in Italy

With money advanced by the Richmond (Virginia) Ladies Association for a full-length statue of Henry Clay, Hart left for Florence in 1849. For most sculptors of Hart's generation a move abroad was seen as a necessary step in their careers. During the first half of the nineteenth century American art academies functioned as institutions more for promoting the arts and elevating public taste than for training aspiring artists. So, while American sculptors were adept at realistic portrait busts, they lacked the skills needed to produce monumental statues expressive of our nation's ideals. Between 1825 and the Centennial, more than one hundred American sculptors, including most represented in this installation, took up residence in either Rome or Florence, cities which were preeminent in the field of marble statuary.

Adjusting to life abroad was difficult for most Americans, who frequently complained about the oppressive summer heat, bouts of influenza, and the language barrier. Sculptors from provincial backgrounds also experienced culture shock. Reared in a society governed by puritanical values, some were disturbed by the free lifestyle and moral laxity. Yet most chose to remain.

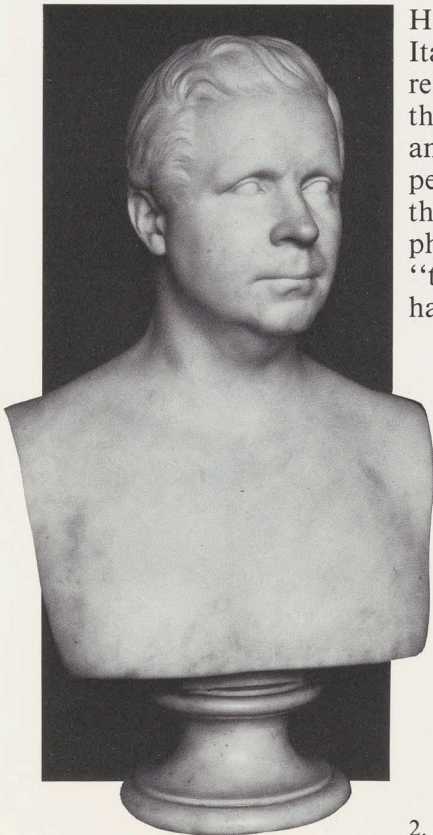
From an artistic point of view, of course, there was no comparison between life in Italy and America. Arriving in Rome in 1835, where he was overwhelmed by the number of statues in the Vatican collections, young Thomas Crawford (1811/13?-1857) recalled having seen a total of six statues in his native New York City. Crawford and his contemporaries enrolled in Italy's renowned art academies, where they drew not only from plaster casts but also from nude models—a rare practice in America. Some benefitted from association with Europe's outstanding neoclassical sculptors, Bertel Thorwaldsen in Rome and Lorenzo Bartolini in Florence. Each city, moreover, had an international community of artists and writers, who provided our sculptors with intellectual stimulation. The Brownings, for example, were frequent visitors at Hiram Powers' home in Florence.

There were also practical advantages to residence in Italy. Artists had access to the finest white marble and to skilled craftsmen who assisted them for relatively little compensation. Creating a marble statue involved a number of steps. Though studio practices varied, the sculptor's role, in addition to that of supervising the overall production of the work, was to create the original design in clay or plaster. He or she also applied the finishing touches to the marble statue. Many of the intermediate steps—including the roughing out of the marble—were given to

assistants. The availability of cheap, skilled labor was one of the reasons Hiram Powers, despite his objections to life in Italy, remained in Florence for thirty-six years until his death, without ever returning home.

Hiram Powers

The decision to settle in Florence or Rome was usually based on the artist's connections in that particular city. Hiram Powers (1805–1873), the most celebrated American sculptor of the nineteenth century, chose Florence because he knew Horatio Greenough, a distinguished American sculptor who lived there. But it is also true that sculptors like Powers and Hart would have found Florence more sympathetic to their aesthetic preference for naturalism than Rome, where a more doctrinaire approach to the revival of antiquity prevailed.²



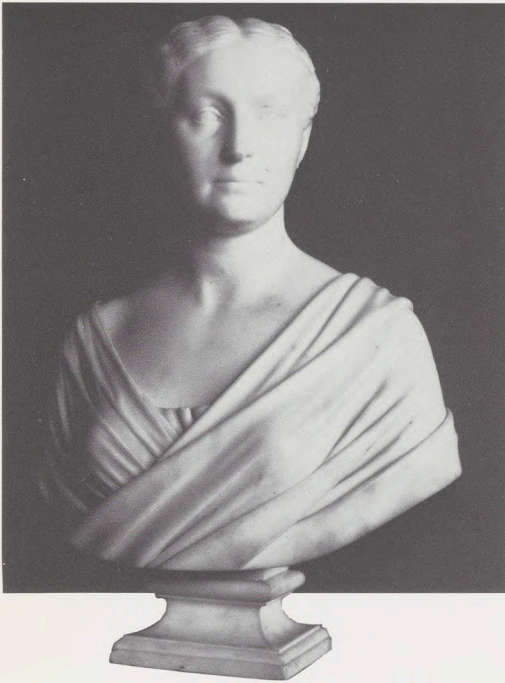
Hiram Powers, *William J. Stone*, marble c.1842.

Having arrived there in 1837, Powers made portraits in Italy that achieved a synthesis of the real and the ideal, reflecting the influence of his new surroundings. The three busts in the Corcoran have an air of classical calm and permanence with little or no hint of the subject's personality. However, each provides an accurate—and in the case of *William J. Stone* (c. 1842) a quite detailed—physical description of the sitter. Powers judged the face “the true index of the Soul, where everything is written had we the wisdom to read it.”³

2. See Douglas Hyland, *Lorenzo Bartolini and Italian Influences on American Sculptors in Florence 1825–1850* (New York: Garland, 1985) and Kathryn Greenthal, Paula Kozol, Jan Seidler Ramirez, *American Figurative Sculpture in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1986), pp. xii, xiii, 4–5. The idea that neoclassicism in Florence was more naturalistic, in part due to that city's strong current of naturalism from the Renaissance, is one of the central themes of Hyland's book.

3. Quoted in Greenthal, p. 29.

Powers' portrait of *Anna Barker Ward*, was modelled in 1838, one year after the sculptor moved to Italy. It was finished in 1843. At first glance, this bust appears to represent a classical goddess, but upon closer inspection the subject's features persuade us that she is a real person. Powers' fusion of the real and the ideal—an essential characteristic of nineteenth-century neoclassicism—is also clearly illustrated in the portrait of *Alice Key Pendleton* (1870), the daughter of Francis Scott Key. Mrs. Pendleton was forty-five when she posed for Powers, who made no attempt to disguise the signs of middle age. Still, he alludes to an ideal—that of the noble ancient Roman matron—proper, dignified, and restrained.



Hiram Powers, *Alice Key Pendleton*, marble 1870. (left)



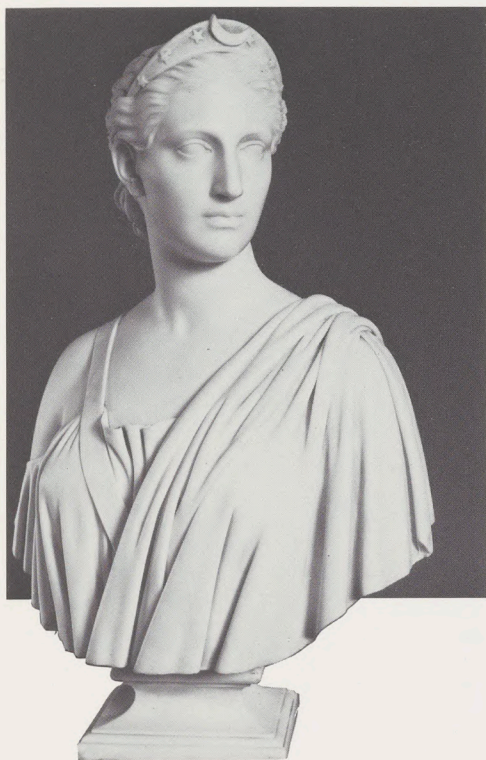
Hiram Powers, *Anna Barker Ward*, marble 1843. (right)

Idealized Statuary

Powers arrived in Italy at a time when America's sizeable upper middle class enjoyed more wealth, education, and leisure than ever before. Americans had acquired a taste for the ideal. Powers and his contemporaries responded by producing ideal sculptures which represented lofty ideas as well as specific figures from mythology, the Bible, fiction, and poetry. Powers' sales of idealized busts, which were especially popular with American tourists, provided his chief source of income in Italy.

Although Powers' first idealized bust—*A Country Woman* (1838)—was based on a live model, the majority, including *Proserpine* (1845), *America* (1850), and *Diana* (1853),⁴ derive from a common generic source: imperial Roman

portraiture, which conforms to a classical Greek ideal. Therefore, Powers' ideal busts vary little from one another. *Diana* and *America* are virtually identical, and even *Proserpine* shares some of their classicized features: the blank expression, flush bridge of the nose, almond-shaped eyes, and grooved waves of hair falling behind the ears. The figures are individualized by their specific attributes. *America* is crowned with a tiara of thirteen stars; *Diana*, goddess of the night and the hunt, wears a tiara decorated with the moon and the stars, and a quiver strap adorned with symbols of the chase. *Proserpine*, a goddess connected with nature's seasonal rebirth, has a wreath of wheat encircling her head and emerges from a bed of acanthus leaves, symbol of her immortality.



Two idealized marble busts by Hiram Powers: *Diana*, 1853 (left) and *America*, 1850 (right).

The associations of Powers' idealized busts contributed to their popularity. For while nineteenth-century Americans did not study classical art in school, they had been conditioned to appreciate the ideal largely through rhapsodic passages in romantic poetry and literature. To possess a classicized bust of *Proserpine* by Powers or *Il Penseroso* (1863) by William Rinehart was to experience the same emotions that had moved Keats when he wrote, in his *Ode on a Grecian Urn* (1819): "Beauty is truth, truth beauty. . ."

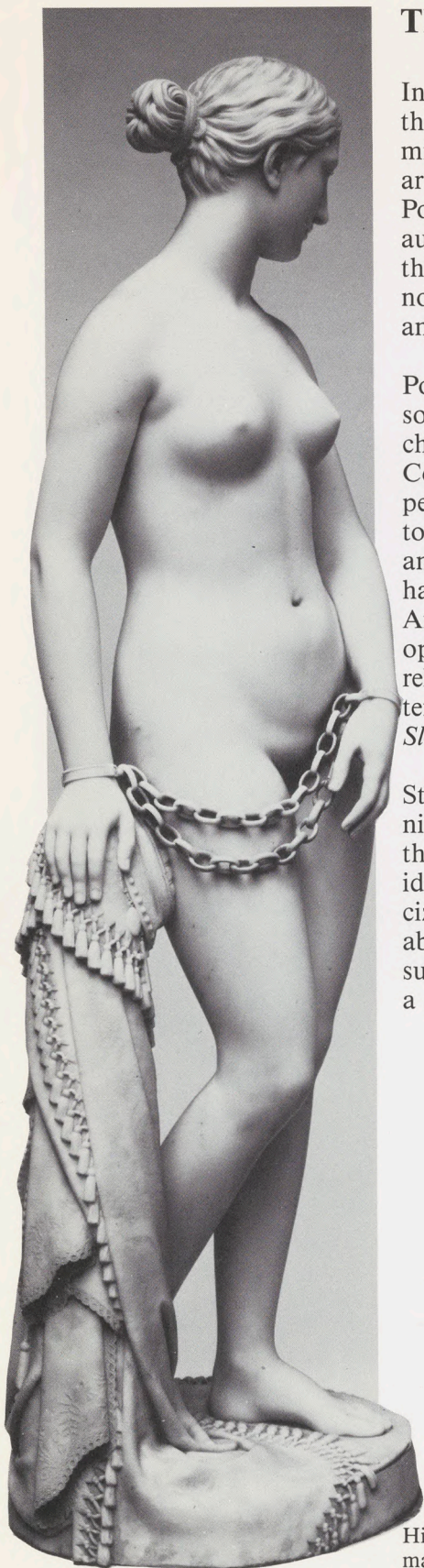
4. With the exception of *A Country Woman*, all of Powers' idealized busts were reproduced in multiple copies by his studio. The dates given for each refer to the original marble, not the copy in the Corcoran.

The Greek Slave

In 1841, when Powers conceived *The Greek Slave* (1846), the problematic issue of nudity was foremost on his mind. While the nude was a central feature of classical art and was understood as such by artists and connoisseurs, Powers intended to show *The Greek Slave* to a wide American audience who would not necessarily be conversant with this tradition. Thus he invented a subject whose story not only justified her nudity but was rich in meaning and pointedly moral.

Powers' statue represents a Greek Christian maiden being sold into slavery by the Turks. Forced to disrobe, she stands chained, yet aloof despite her humiliating circumstances. Conspicuously placed against her robe are two cherished personal belongings, a locket and cross. The story alludes to two popular issues of the day: anti-slavery sentiment, and sympathy for the Greek War of Independence which had ended in 1830 but which still symbolized for many Americans and Europeans the triumph of liberty over oppression and the moral superiority of the Christian religion.⁵ For an audience who placed a premium on the content and morality of an artwork, the story of *The Greek Slave* virtually guaranteed its popular success.

Stylistically, *The Greek Slave* represents the essence of nineteenth-century neoclassicism, in which the real and the ideal co-exist within one work. Powers expresses the ideal through the overall beauty of the figure: the classicized face, pose, and calm expression; the simple, almost abstract outline; and especially the flawless white marble surface, which for many observers elevated the statue to a spiritual plane.



Hiram Powers, *The Greek Slave*,
marble 1846.

At the same time, the statue is realistic in its precise description of textures (note especially the robe), anecdotal detail (the locket and cross), and naturalistic proportions. To heighten the statue's sensual appeal, Powers also deliberately chose a porous marble and invented special tools to exploit its fleshlike qualities.

Between 1847 and 1849 the first replica of *The Greek Slave*⁶ travelled throughout America on a carefully orchestrated tour. In various cities the statue was examined by clergymen who deemed her acceptable for public viewing. In the words of one minister, whose feelings were shared by many others, she was not really naked but "clothed in sentiment." Anticipating public backlash, Powers' agent distributed pamphlets describing the circumstances which had led to her pitiable state.

People were charged 25 cents for a single viewing of *The Greek Slave*, 50 cents for the season. In addition to netting \$100,000 in this country, Powers' statue was the most popular attraction at the 1851 Crystal Palace exposition in London, where she stood atop a revolving pedestal. The subject of hundreds, if not thousands, of laudatory poems, articles, and sermons, *The Greek Slave* also inspired numerous replicas, ranging in size from five more full-length versions by Powers to thousands of mass-produced miniatures. The artwork that made nudity acceptable in America also became the most famous statue of the nineteenth century.

5. Vivian M. Green, "Hiram Powers' 'Greek Slave': Emblem of Freedom," *The American Art Journal*, vol. 14 (Autumn, 1982), pp. 31-39.

6. The Corcoran owns the second replica.

American Sculpture in the Victorian Era

A Sentimental Mood

Generally speaking, American statuary after 1850 continued in a classicized style, but with a more explicitly sentimental point of view. One example is Thomas Crawford's *Peri at the Gates of Paradise* (1855), taken from Thomas Moore's popular orientaling romance, *Lalla Rookh* (1817). *Peri* is a fallen angel from Persian mythology who seeks to reenter heaven but must first bring God the gift he desires most—the tears of a penitent. Here, there is but a veil of classical detachment through which the onus of the story is revealed.

Few themes touched the hearts of Victorian audiences more than childhood innocence. *Sans Souci* (1865) by Chauncey Ives (1810–1894) depicts a young girl “without cares” lost in a state of reverie, presumably induced by the book held in her hand. Ives' statue is also a good example of how neoclassical artists adapted antique sources to suit contemporary taste. With her windswept hair and arched neck, *Sans Souci* strongly recalls the ecstatic maenads, attendants of the wine-god Dionysus, in Hellenistic sculpture. Such classical representations would have been known to Ives, who worked in Rome.

Innocence is also one of several themes explored in the myth of Endymion, the subject of an exquisitely carved marble (1874) by another sculptor in Rome, Maryland-born William Rinehart (1825–1874). The story of the young shepherd boy cast into perpetual sleep by the gods was especially popular in the nineteenth century, most notably as the subject of Keats' poem by the same name. Rinehart's sculpture treats the themes of love and immortality, thus imbuing his nude figure of a youth with moralizing sentiment despite its erotic overtones.

Portrait Busts

After mid-century portrait statuary also underwent a transformation. In later neoclassical busts the perfect balance between realism and idealization which Powers and Hart had achieved in their respective portraits of *William J. Stone* and *John Crittenden* tips in favor of realism. To emphasize the importance of his subject, Henry Kirke Brown (1814–1886) represents Vice President *John Breckinridge* (1857) in heroic nudity—a classical Greek convention adopted by Roman artists. Yet the face itself is an unidealized likeness, lacking both the strong characterization of *Crittenden* and the classical permanence

of *Stone*. The culmination of the trend toward greater realism is seen in Rinehart's bust of *James C. McGuire* (1864), which makes little concession to classicism, even with respect to costume. Indeed, here there is nothing to evoke the world of antiquity other than the medium of marble itself.



Thomas Crawford, *Peri at the Gates of Paradise*, marble 1855.

Conclusion

American sculpture, even during its most classicized phase, had never lost touch with its naturalistic tradition. Powers, Hart, Rinehart, and scores of other neoclassical sculptors had carefully observed nature even in their pursuit of the ideal. As the works in the Corcoran attest, the essence of American neoclassicism is indeed its fusion of the real and the ideal.

Although American neoclassicism was part of an international movement, it also emerged in response to nationalistic needs. It declined after the Civil War when the distant world of antiquity hardly seem relevant to the American experience. A few American carvers continued to work in Italy, but the majority of native sculptors were attracted to Paris, where bronze was the dominant sculpture material and romantic style was in its ascendancy.

Kathleen Brylawski Miller



Installation Checklist

Henry Kirke Brown (1814–1886)

John C. Breckinridge

Marble 1857

Gift of the Honorable George Taylor 73.1

Thomas Crawford (1811/13–1857)

Peri at the Gates of Paradise

Marble 1855

Museum purchase 86.10

Alexander Galt (1827–1863)

Bacchante

Marble c. 1849

Gift of William Wilson Corcoran 73.7

Joel Tanner Hart (1810–1877)

John T. Crittenden

Marble 1849

Gift of Edward Clark 68.28.10

Henry Clay

Marble 1830s

Museum purchase 78.2

Mrs. Agnes Maxwell Kearney

Marble 1854

Gift of Miss Virginia Livingston Hunt 42.6

Jean-Antoine Houdon (1741–1828)

Joel Barlow

Plaster 1804

Gift of Peter T. Barlow 14.9

John Paul Jones

Plaster 1780s

Gift of Francis D. Millet 04.7

Chauncey B. Ives (1810–1894)

Sans Souci

Marble 1865

Gift of John B. Henderson 99.7

John C. King (1806–1882)

Commodore Morris, USN

Marble 1858

Gift of William Wilson Corcoran 69.77

Hiram Powers (1805–1873)

America

Marble 1850

Gift of Henry C. de Courcy May 48.18

Diana

Marble 1853

Gift of Mrs. Stella McCalla Sands 56.7

A Country Woman

Marble 1838

Gift of William Wilson Corcoran 73.5

The Greek Slave

Marble 1846

Gift of William Wilson Corcoran 73.4

Alice Key Pendleton

Marble 1870

Gift of Jane Frances Brice 36.6

Proserpine

Marble 1873

Gift of William Wilson Corcoran 73.6

William J. Stone

Marble c. 1842

Gift of Mrs. William J. Stone 83.5

Anna Barker Ward

Marble 1843

Gift of Benjamin Warder Thoron,

Louise Thoron MacVeagh,

Ellen Warder Thoron MacVeagh,

Faith Thoron Knapp and Gray Thoron 58.11



William Rinehart, *Endymion*,
marble 1874.

Preston Powers (1843-1914)

Professor T.J.R. Agassiz

Marble 1874

Gift of J.T. Robinson 68.28.14

William Rinehart (1825-1874)

Endymion

Marble 1874

Museum purchase 75.9

Roma Lyman

Marble 1873

Gift of Mrs. Roma Lyman Niles 47.19

James C. McGuire

Marble 1864

Bequest of James Clark McGuire 31.1

Il Penseroso

Marble 1863

Gift of William Wilson Corcoran 73.8



Corcoran School of Art drawing class in the museum's atrium, c.1918.

William Rush (1756-1833)

Linnaeus

Wood 1812

Museum purchase, William A. Clark Fund 51.20

John Quincy Adams Ward (1830-1910)

William Wilson Corcoran

Marble 1883

Trustees of Hillcrest, by exchange. 39.16

